

PUBLIC HEARING
STATE BOARD OF ELECTIONS
STATE CAPITOL
RICHMOND, VA
Friday, August 28, 2009

As elsewhere across the United States, local issues at the city and county level throughout Virginia are complex and multifaceted. City and county governments, along with local citizens, grapple with matters related to police and fire departments, social services, water supply, trash and garbage disposal, parks and recreation, libraries, public schools, landscaping and road repair, building inspection, revenue collection, and more.

Long- and short-term residents within cities and counties participate in local decision-making through channels such as informal meetings and discussions, organized forums, and public hearings, and they have the right to vote on local issues. Along with their participatory rights come responsibilities—responsibilities that include obeying local ordinances, paying taxes, keeping up property, properly disposing of trash and garbage, etc.

A decision by the State Board of Elections to allow temporary residents of state-owned property—college students living in on-campus dorms—to participate in local decision-making through voter registration and voting on local issues would give college students no additional rights than students already enjoy: the right to register to vote--and to vote in national, state and local elections--in the location of their legal “domicile.”

As I see it, such a decision by the State Board of Elections, in addition to offering no substantive benefits to students except “convenience,” carries with it three harmful consequences.

1) It would change the definitions of, and blur the longstanding legal distinction between, “residence” and “domicile.”

2) It would dilute the right of city/county taxpayers to make decisions on local issues.

3) It could have a devastating impact on the future of small college towns/cities such as Williamsburg, where the ratio of city residents to on-campus college students is precariously imbalanced (11,063 city residents over age 15 vs. 7,625 undergraduate and graduate students, according to statistics from the Virginia Employment Commission and the College of William and Mary, respectively).

I strongly urge you to uphold the legal distinction in Virginia between “domicile” and “residence” and to provide clear guidelines to local registrars with the goal of maintaining a strict interpretation of voter residency rules.

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